

The Influence of Irving Benjamin Rouse: A Conversation

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Irving Benjamin Rouse is a Curator Emeritus at the Peabody Museum and Professor Emeritus at Yale University. Dr Irving Rouse has published many volumes with the Yale University Press of Anthropology, including *The Tainos: The People Who Greeted Columbus* (1992), and *Migrations in Prehistory* (1986). He was one of the pioneers of formal Connecticut Archaeology, early Caribbean archaeology, and is spoken of across the Antilles with respect. But don't call him Irving. As Ben Rouse will tell you, "My dad was Irving Rouse. I'm Ben." [1]

In the October 2004 meeting of the Archaeological Society of Connecticut, Paul Grant-Costa elaborated upon the genesis of the Society. Paul has spent years transcribing handwritten notes, ancient Scientific American articles, and early drafts of site reports, focusing on the works of Froelich Rainey, George Grant MacCurdy and Cornelius Osgood. To paraphrase Paul's research, the Society was started in 1934 by a handful of people working from an idea originating in Washington DC and sponsored by a grant from the National Science Foundation. All of this was to

inspire Yale University to gather, organize and train local archaeologists in the hopes of completing the Archaeological Survey of Connecticut begun twenty years before. Founding members included Lyent Russell, Ben Rouse (who edited the Bulletin) Carlisle Smith, Cornelius Osgood, and George Grant MacCurdy. [2]

I set out to ask Dr Rouse about his own contributions to the Society. In Ben's own words, "I did local archaeology. Quite a bit of it. I was 16 years old when I became involved in the ASC. I came from Rochester New York, so this was a big deal." This conversation took place in July 2004; I had caught up with Dr Rouse in a room near his office in 175 Whitney Avenue, the putative "basement" of the Peabody Museum which is located across the street, and the original home of Yale's Anthropology Department. Despite the passage of many years, Ben Rouse has continued to come into his offices at 175 Whitney on a fairly regular basis. He continued, "I liked the fact I was only 16 years old and involved with the ASC. I was involved quite early, admitted to Yale at 16, though I didn't actually start my classes 'til I was 17." [3]

Ben Rouse came to Yale University in 1930. His dad had graduated from Yale, and owned a nursery in Rochester. That fall, Ben worked at the Peabody; actually, as he put it, he “worked all over”. His family had sent him off to school with \$500, but he had put it into a bank that abruptly failed. It was the Great Depression, and Ben had lost his college living expenses soon after arriving in New Haven. So, he had to work. Ben did small jobs, odd jobs, almost any job: “I mowed a LOT of lawns”, Ben said. He eventually ended up at the Peabody Museum cataloging collections. By that winter, Ben was attending classes full time, working 20 hours a week unpacking artifacts and assigning catalog numbers, and he soon began to recognize he was developing a new interest.[4]

Benjamin Rouse, son of a nursery owner, had grown up with a respect for plants. His mind was set on botany in 1930 and on the Yale University Forestry School, which even then was quite prestigious. But while cataloging specimens at the Peabody for Dr Cornelius Osgood, he realized that although the botanical collections were in chronological order, the anthropological collections were not. “I unpacked a lot of boxes that had sat around for a long time,” Ben remembered. He was soon sitting in on graduate classes in anthropology and American Indian Studies, and Dr Osgood was eventually not just Ben Rouse’s employer, but his mentor.[5]

While working at the Peabody and attending class at Yale, Ben Rouse remained involved with local archaeology, going to ASC meetings, serving as editor for the *ASC Bulletin*, contributing articles. His fascination with categories and chronology, as well as burgeoning research interests in the chronological expansion of Caribbean migrations, continued to be pursued as well. But the Peabody kept him physically connected with Connecticut sites-local folks came to him with ‘arrow heads’ and other projectile points found on their family farms, especially the Rocky Hill area near Hartford: “A lot of material came from there.”[6]

In the late 1950s it was decided that the University of Connecticut in Storrs would handle local archaeology, and Yale University would focus on national and international archaeology. How did he feel about that? “I didn’t care by then,” he said with a shrug. By then, Ben was formulating migration theories on a global scale, encompassing Japan, Polynesia, Inuit cultures, as well as Caribbean groups. His views on migration were innovative. Anthropologists tended to apply the “European Model of Conquest” to expansions of people across the globe and Ben realized that not one explanation would fit all situations. The gallop across continents and oceans favored by Europeans eager for trade goods, land, and gold could not, to Ben, be reasonably applied to small mobile bands of horticulturists and gatherers. Ben taught, worked out his theories, and remained connected to both the Peabody Museum and Connecticut archaeology.[7]

“A big exhibit on one major site”, as Ben fondly remembered, had long been on display at the Peabody Museum, and removed to create space. This collection from Fort Shantok was a favorite of his, from a site located in eastern Connecticut near New London. As time went by, the Native American displays at the Peabody shrank in size and became somewhat forlorn. In 1984, Lucianne Lavin worked with Ben to organize the Native American collections and create a new exhibit, displaying tools, baskets, and other

artifacts from Paleo-indian up to Late Woodland Era and Contact. With his love of typology, his own concepts of horizon and tradition, and his desire for proper chronological tidiness, Lucianne and Ben created a vibrant physical timeline of Native cultures in Connecticut, which remains on display in the Peabody Museum. This series of display cases incorporates elements from past displays, arranged with comprehensive time lines and artifact type charts.[8]

But even now, his favorite exhibit remains tucked away. Ben Rouse would prefer materials from the Fort Shantok collection be eventually resurrected from storage, and restored at the end of his own future section. “It [the Fort] was [located at] a source of wampum for the Iroquois— conch shells, strombus.” The Fort became state park, and has now been transferred to the Mohegan Nation.[9]

In 1935, a young Ben Rouse was invited out into the field by Froelich Rainey, then pursuing his PhD at Yale and participating in the Yale Caribbean Archaeology Program. Reminiscing on his field trip to Haiti with Rainey, Ben remembered, “A wealthy man had a yacht party and wrote off some of its expenses by having students there. This was in Port-au-Prince. I stopped there before my first field trip up north.” Ben couldn’t find a way up there. “Finally, I took a taxi. He kept having flat tires, and would stop a lot and ask for more money because it was so far up to Cap Haitien. Turns out, there was a local bus that went back and forth! It [the bus] was an old truck with planks across the back. It was quite pleasant. I enjoyed my trip back down south, sitting with other people and interacting. Much better than my terrible trip up north!” Ben worked a bit with Rainey, but didn’t return to the Caribbean until 1938 when he began his own work in Puerto Rico.[10]

Froelich Rainey based his ideas about Caribbean expansion and migration on the findings of Gudmund Hatt and other early Caribbean archaeologists. It is still accepted that after pre-ceramic cultures peopled the islands, societies followed that utilized well-made white-on-red painted ceramics. Eventually, potters who employed sophisticated modeled and incised ceramic styles inhabited the larger islands; these were The Taino. The first potters tended to eat crab, the latter to dine on clams.[11]

“My first field work was with Rainey in 1935.” Ben had entered the doctorate program by then. “Rainey saw Crab and Shell [Cultures] as two separate migrations. But though early [forms of] pottery were painted, and later ceramics were incised, there was a large transition period of plain redware. The locals didn’t want to bring it in!” Rouse feels that the most well-known potters, the Classic Taíno of the c. 800 AD–Contact Era, transitioned on the Islands in place, moving stylistically from high quality white-on-red painted ware to elaborately incised and modeled ceramics, with a long period of plain red-ware in use.[12]

Ben considered 400 potential sites across Puerto Rico, narrowing the selection to 44 locations. He relied on a local physician and avocational archaeologist, Dr Guenard, for information on prehistoric village sites, large shell middens, and hospitable farmers who might allow excavations in their fields. Ben also went where Rainey had gone, either

excavating at the same sites or getting as close as possible; in one instance he dug a trench in someone's backyard-the ancient village had become a modern one, its shell heaps dispersed and plowed for crops. The pottery seriations he obtained from these sites, with corresponding human remains, other artifacts, and relative dating using stratigraphy enabled Ben to deduce the patterns of human habitation on the island of Puerto Rico.[13]

Previous workers including Hatt had surmised the transition from white-on-red painted pottery to highly stylized zoomorphic ceramics occurred in the Greater Antilles in situ. Rainey envisioned an early so-called Crab Culture with pottery similar to Orinoco River Basin pottery replaced by a second migration from South America with the modeled pottery. Rouse tested those two hypotheses by excavating across Puerto Rico for possible transition pottery, and discovering a large period of plain redware. He was thus able to combine various migration and ceramic style hypotheses, elaborating some, and gently disproving others.[14]

My dating of the human skeletal remains of Saladoid and Taíno individuals curated at Yale Peabody is founded on Ben's work. Comparing individuals from different eras of ancient Puerto Rico, using stratigraphy and relative dating data of the various ceramic styles obtained by Ben, enabled me to recognize physiological changes of the populations over time, as well as evolving status differences. I have been able to add further support to popular ethnographic claims that although the Taíno did indeed have two separate classes, no one lacked for basic necessities.[15]

“During the late 1950s, it became clear that that with the increased pace of development in Connecticut a central office was needed to ensure that archaeological sites were not destroyed unnecessarily during construction. The goal was to survey, test and excavate important sites. Federal environmental protection laws were soon to follow and through Ben's hard work and advocacy the state archaeologist position was created by the legislature.[16]

“This brief overview has described some of Ben Rouse's contributions to Connecticut and Caribbean archaeology. It is now clear that Rouse was a major influence on the development of prehistoric archaeology, preservation and museum exhibition in Connecticut. While an important researcher in Caribbean archaeology, Ben's contribution to Connecticut archaeology was enormous. We take this opportunity to recognize his research, teaching and his many contributions to future generations of archaeologists working in our state.”—Dr Harold Juli, Connecticut College.[17]

Ben Rouse has influenced Connecticut archaeology with his early and continued support of the Archaeological Society of Connecticut [see sidebar]. Ben has changed Caribbean archaeology and Migration Theory (*Migrations in Prehistory*, 1986) by his simple determination to sample all of Puerto Rico, both across the island and down through time, and by his respect for Caribbean archaeologists. He has spent many years working with Caribbean archaeologists such as Jose Cruxent (in Venezuela: The Saladero Site), Ricardo Alegria (in Puerto Rico: La Hacienda Grande Site), and fostering working relationships with other notable anthropologists such as Desmond Nicolson and Luis

Allaire. Spanish speaking researchers are generally under-read and under-appreciated by many Western scholars, leaving their findings buried behind cultural and linguistic barriers. North American and Latin workers speak fondly and respectfully of Ben Rouse to this day, almost 65 years after Ben first landed in Puerto Rico: a bright young man in his twenties, enthusiastic, and eager to explore.[18]

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